

Author teaches about Code Talkers

Dianna M. Náñez

The Arizona Republic

Oct. 28, 2006 12:00AM



Gilbert Coronado Elementary School third- and fourth-graders on Wednesday learned the story of World War II's Navajo Code Talker soldiers from the author and illustrator of the children's book *The Unbreakable Code*.

The book, published in 1996, is about a young Navajo boy and his grandfather, a Code Talker. It won its most recent accolade this week when Gov. Janet Napolitano announced the book had been selected for her Expanded Literacy Program.

As part of the program, which began in 2003, roughly 88,000 free copies of *The Unbreakable Code* will be distributed to fourth-graders.

The idea for the book came about while author Sara Hoagland Hunter was studying at Dartmouth College in the late 1970s. Hunter tucked away a moving story she heard from a Nez Perce classmate, Heather Wilson, about her tribe's contribution as World War II soldiers.

Years later, Hunter and illustrator Julia Miner traveled to Arizona's Navajo reservation to talk with former Code Talkers and Navajo families.

The families charged the artists with documenting their history as developers of a military code that the Japanese could not break. They asked for a story they could share with their grandchildren.

The children's book won national literature awards, including the Smithsonian Notable Books for Children award.

"These men were so inspiring to me, I had to get their story right," Hunter said.

Hunter said she was paralyzed by the desire to accurately describe the lives of men who so staunchly believed in peace, and yet fought and died for a government that had once inflicted so much pain upon their people.

"The task was monumental," she said. "I would sometimes sit frozen at my computer. Every time I had a draft I would send it (to them)."

Her lasting lesson, Hunter said, came from discovering that because the Navajo code was classified until 1969, many soldiers could never receive the recognition they deserved.

"I learned from them modesty and selflessness," she said. "To listen to their life stories they were not bitter, only proud and courageous, (and) such an inspiration for me."

The Unbreakable Code

- The Navajo code was never broken during World War II.
- The first book Julia Miner illustrated, *The Shepherd's Song: The Twenty-third Psalm*, helped pave the way for permission to speak to the Navajo Code Talkers. The book had illustrations of sheep. Many of the Navajo people were sheep herders, and appreciated the lifelike sheep drawings. Book author Sara Hoagland Hunter said they turned the pages of the book and said, "Oh, I had a mischievous one just like that." They trusted the illustrator would depict their land with the same faithful strokes.
- *The Unbreakable Code* is dedicated to Nez Perce Native American Heather Wilson, who shared the Navajo story with her friend Hunter, and later died during the book's writing.